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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The anatomy of Intergroups – network governance in the political engine room of the European Parliament

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Intergroups are key components in the European Parliament's *modus operandi*, allowing members from different political groups to focus on specific political topics. Hitherto, the defining characteristics of Intergroups have not received much attention in academic literature. This article remedies this lack by conducting a study of Intergroups coached by network theory. It is shown that there are considerable variations between them. Though it is only parliamentarians who can be formal members, Intergroups may comprise a variety of different actors, and interaction is characterised by interests, non-hierarchical negotiations, easy communication lines and trust. Some Intergroups are targeted by interest groups to such an extent that a fusion nearly happens, whereas others do not receive any attention at all. Intergroups can have considerable impact by moulding ideas for new 'wise' policies. Finally, the analysis compares the function of Intergroups to that of the US Congress Caucuses and demonstrates that Intergroups bear resemblance in the way that they allow Members of the European Parliament to signal their preferences, exchange information and coordinate legislative initiatives.

**Keywords:** European Parliament; Intergroups; lobbyism; network theory; EU

## Introduction

Intergroups are key components in the European Parliament's *modus operandi*. The European Parliament is the only transnational, directly elected representative chamber in the world; it has 23 official working languages, and its 736 members represent more than 100 different national political parties, even though these parties are organised into just a few main groups. (Hix, Noury, and Roland 2007). In this unique Parliament, there are two types of cross-party groupings: the political committees with a formal status and power, and Intergroups which do not have that. Intergroups are unofficial forums where Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) from different party groups can cultivate their interests in particular political topics such as 'Youth Issues', 'Social Economy', 'Disability' or 'Water' and 'Media' (Bouwen 2004). Raunio (1997) refers to Intergroups as informal actors and cross-group coalitions. Despite their non-legal status, the Intergroups are often taken into account and referred to by parliamentarians, and they are regulated by the leadership of the European Parliament (see below).<sup>1</sup> This 'double-sidedness' makes the study of Intergroups both a particular challenge and an interesting research object.

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The Intergroups of the European Parliament have hardly been examined as the dependent variable from a scholarly point of view, even though they occupy a significant amount of time and attention of many parliamentarians, and in spite of the fact that they are sometimes seen as a controversial phenomenon (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003, 155–162). Existing studies treat Intergroups as independent or intervening variables when assessing the role of lobbying in demarcated policy fields of the European Union (EU) such as business (Bouwen 2002, 2004; Eising 2004), agriculture (Swinbank 2004) or social policy (Defourny 2001), and when mapping interest representation in general towards the European Parliament (Kohler-Koch 1997; Earnshaw and Judge 2006) or the EU system as a whole (Jönsson et al. 1998). According to Hix, Raunio, and Scully (2003, 193), research on the European Parliament can be classified into four interrelated clusters: (1) the general development and functioning of the European Parliament; (2) political behaviour and European Parliament elections; (3) the internal politics and organisation of the European Parliament; and (4) inter-institutional bargaining between the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. It is only research in areas (1) and (3) that has sometimes mentioned the Intergroups as a phenomenon of the European Parliament. These references are first and foremost made by Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton (2003) and Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton (2007) and have a descriptive nature. Other researchers' references to Intergroups are to a large degree based on the laconic writings of Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton (2003) and Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton (2007) (Landorf 2010, 6).

This article will fill in a blank spot on the scholarly map of the European Parliament and more broadly on the EU decision-making literature by examining the anatomy of Intergroups based on a framework distilled from network theory. In more general terms, the article will contribute with a study on the role of networks in political governance, which is a subject of growing importance for both scholars and practitioners. The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, theory and data collection are presented. Next, the anatomy of Intergroups is dissected following the distilled research questions. Afterwards, Intergroups are compared to the Caucuses of the US Congress with which they seem to bear some resemblance in order to find out how alike they actually are. Finally, the key findings are summarised and discussed in the last section.

## Theory and data

Network theory is applied to the case of Intergroups, because the linkages between MEPs in Intergroups (both between and within them) construct a network of formal and informal connections that is suitable for network analysis. The use of the theory is also in accordance with the focus of this piece of research as this approach seems to be more empirically sensitive. In other words, the low level of abstraction of the analysis of this article fits the theoretical choice.

In accordance with contemporary research on Caucuses in the US Congress (Victor and Ringe 2009), this network analysis assumes that actors are participating in a concrete social system (in casu an Intergroup) in which other actors impact upon another's decisions, and secondly, that the concept of structure within a social system must be a focus of investigation (Parsons 1995, 185). In addition, it is often stressed that organisational structures in networks are so due to resources held by other actors (Benson 1982).

Part of the discussion about networks is concentrated on the difference between policy networks and the more closed policy community, because they seem to be in opposition to each other in regard to the 'tightness' of a network. A policy community

comprises a more tightly knit set of relationships between actors who share central values towards issues and policies. Rhodes (1988) argues that the types of networks are to be distinguished by their degree of integration. At one end of the continuum are policy communities which have stable and restricted membership and are tightly integrated with the policy-making process. At the opposite end of the continuum are the policy issue networks, which represent a much looser set of interests and are less stable and non-exclusive and have much weaker points of entry into the policy-making process (Parsons 1995, 189). Policy communities are expected to develop where the political system needs highly resourced groups to assist in the policy-making and policy-implementation processes, while policy issue networks develop in areas of lesser importance or where there is a high degree of political controversy (Smith 1993).

The traditional network approach, however, has been criticised in several respects (Atkinson and Coleman 1992). Firstly, there is a problem with the impact of political discourse. Secondly, there are difficulties with the issue of the internationalisation of many policy domains. And thirdly, the network/community approach has failed to address the problems of policy innovation and change. These criticisms were dealt with by a new wave of network theorists who surfaced as a result of Manuel Castells' theory about the network society as a function of the emergence of new global information and communication technologies (Castells 1996, 2006). Here, it is assumed that good governance based on networks embodies a form of power that is intrusive, efficient and capable of delivering more freedom, more efficiency from below, innovative problem-solving and political participation by reflexive citizens (Bang 2004).

It is also claimed that the political decision-making process has been transformed by the rise of the Castellsian network society (Bang and Esmark 2009, 14). States and state-like entities such as the EU have to a smaller or larger degree become multilayered network states based on multilevel governance systems (Kohler-Koch 2005). This has led to the emergence of steering and coordination based on concepts such as 'negotiation', 'communication' and 'trust'. Of course, such public governance networks vary considerably in terms of the level of formalisation, stability and inclusiveness (cf. above about network vs. communities), but a common trademark is the involvement of non-state actors from the private and third sector of stakeholders (Bang and Esmark 2009, 16).

In the limited literature on Intergroups that can be found, the question of lobbyism via the groups has been raised (Kohler-Koch 1997; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003; Earnshaw and Judge 2006). There have been several attempts to regulate the Intergroups since the 1990s; among others, the chairs of the Intergroups are now required to declare any support they might receive from industry or interest groups. The reason for this continued tightening of regulation has primarily been due to heavy critique claiming that the Intergroups' MEPs are too influenced by organised interests, that they are undermining the role of the political groups as the opinion formation centre of the European Parliament, and that transparency in regard to their activities is very limited (Göhring 2003, 117–120; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003, 156–158). As argued by Bang and Esmark (2009), an aspect with the network society is the reorientation of political communication and culture from input to output, from decisions to actions, and from politics to policy. As argued here, good governance is not motivated by worries over democratic polity or politics, but rather by the need for new 'wise' policies to directly and specifically meet and govern the risks confronting reflexive citizens (Bang and Esmark 2009, 16).

Lately, network analysis has been applied to Caucuses in the US Congress (Victor and Ringe 2009), which seem to have many of the same characteristics as Intergroups. Hence,

a comparison between the Intergroups (in the semi-federal European Parliament) and the Caucuses (in the federal US Congress) seems logical. According to research by Victor and Ring (2009, 745), Caucuses in the US Congress have at least three purposes. First, they allow legislators to signal their policy preferences to their colleagues and constituents. Second, they serve as venues for the exchange of information within the legislature. Third, they allow for coordination of legislative action outside the formal party and committee structure. Earlier research suggested that Caucuses provided an extensive, informal structure for legislative action that existed parallel to and counter-balanced the formal organisation of parties and committees (Ainsworthe & Akins 1997). However, based upon network theory, Victor and Ringe (2009) have empirically demonstrated that this is not the case in the US Congress. Instead, Caucuses reflect and reinforce already held positions in parties and committees.

Against the theoretical backdrop developed above, the objectives of the following are to discover the extent to which Intergroups actually function as networks with the characteristics mentioned. These functions mirror those of the Caucuses in the US Congress as discussed above, i.e. coordination of legislative action in question 1, exchange of information in questions 2 and 3, and signalling policy preferences in all the questions from 1 to 5 below. Finally, question 6 compares European Intergroups with their possible corresponding institutions in the US Congress, the Caucuses, based upon the dimensions with which the latter have been analysed (cf. above):

- (1) How is the work in the Intergroups structured and what resources are available for it, cf. Parsons (1995) and Benson (1982)?
- (2) Are Intergroups policy networks or policy communities, cf. Rhodes (1988) and Parsons (1995)?
- (3) Are Intergroups characterised by ‘negotiation’, ‘communication’ and ‘trust’, cf. Bang and Esmark (2009)?
- (4) Are Intergroups characterised by the involvement of non-state actors from private and third sector stakeholders and are they affected by lobbyism, cf. Bang and Esmark (2009), Göhring (2003)?
- (5) Are Intergroups producing suggestions for new ‘wise’ policies, cf. Bang and Esmark (2009)?
- (6) To what extent are the EU Intergroups and US Caucuses alike, cf. Victor and Ringe (2009)?
  - (a) Do Intergroups allow the legislators to signal their policy preference to their colleagues and constituents?
  - (b) Do Intergroups serve as venues for exchange of information within the legislature?
  - (c) Do Intergroups allow for coordination of legislative action outside the formal party and committee structure?
  - (d) Do the Intergroups counterbalance the formal parties or do they in reality reinforce already held positions?

The traditional and state-of-the-art network theory functions as the analytical framework in this article in order to capture information beyond the formal structures of the European Parliament: the interactions of parliamentarians across parties, their behavioural motives for action, and their linkages to actors outside the Parliament which often seem to be neglected in the research on EU institutions (Kauppi 2005). The purpose of the article is to conduct an

exploratory case study to ‘anatomise’ the nature of Intergroups in the European Parliament. By ‘anatomising’ the nature of Intergroups, the aim is to ‘cut open’ this phenomenon the word ‘anatomy’ stems from the Greek ‘anatemno’, i.e. ‘cut up; cut open’ –and examine its constitutive parts. The data used comprises official documents, the scanty academic literature on the topic, and 10 semi-structured interviews plus one written response.

The informants are MEPs representing the major political groups and with various political interests, varying seniority, and a varying degree of active participation in the Intergroups (see [Appendix 1](#) at the end of the article for a list of interviewees, their party affiliation and membership of Intergroups). The members have answered a number of pre-defined questions (sent to them beforehand) via telephone. All these questions have been distilled from network theory. The interviewees seem to be representative of the MEPs in general. Yet, on one dimension, there seems to be a discrepancy, as according to their own answers, the informants might be a bit more active in the Intergroups than MEPs in general are. The focus has been on the so-called formal or registered Intergroups, as they seem to be more influential than their informal and non-registered counterparts (see below).

### **How is the work in the Intergroups structured and what resources are available for it?**

The work of the Intergroups mirrors that of the political groups which play the decisive role in the decision-making of the European Parliament’s leadership, in the allocation of positions in the committees and in the important rapporteur appointments, as well as in setting the Parliament’s agenda (Hix [2005](#)). However, when it comes to the Intergroups, the political groups are less powerful as the MEPs here make decisions on their own. Yet, if an Intergroup wants to draw on logistical resources from the Parliament, it needs the support of at least three political groups which have been allocated a limited number of signatures per term (see [Table 1](#)) (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton [2007](#), 185; Earnshaw and Judge [2006](#), 67). This procedure is similar to the one used by the US Congress as far as the Caucuses are concerned (Victor and Ringe [2009](#)).

Intergroups are both formal and informal groupings of MEPs. Like the US Caucuses, they are outside the party and committee structure. They were first formed in 1979 by the MEPs themselves, after the first direct elections, as a way of exchanging views on specific issues across different political groups. Since then, more than 50 Intergroups (formal and informal) have been active in each parliamentary term (Landorff [2010](#), 22). The focus and the political goals of the Intergroups are very different and range from extremely narrow subjects (e.g. High-Speed Rail, Friends of Israel) to broad issues (e.g. Consumer Affairs, Animal Welfare), just as the level of activity for the different groups varies (European Parliament [2009](#); Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton [2003](#)).

Some Intergroups function on almost a full-time basis with their own secretariat, logo, regular meetings etc., whereas others, representing for instance minor interests, have few resources and little activity (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton [2007](#), 184–185). The formal groups are officially registered, while others are informal (see the following about the consequences of this difference). A decision on whether or not an Intergroup should become a formal or an informal one is made after the newly elected members of the European Parliament have agreed on this through a voting procedure – and after the final acceptance of the number of Intergroups by the Parliament’s leadership. None of the Intergroups are an official part of the Parliament’s structure as such, and hence do not

Table 1. Signatures available to the political groups for the establishment of Intergroups.

EPP	S&D	ALDE	VERTs/ALE	ECR	GUE/NGL	EFD
21	21	10	8	8	6	5

EPP, European People's Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; VERTs/ALE, Les Verts/Alliance libre européenne; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy.

Source: Decision of the Conference of Presidents of 17 September 2009 on the number of signatures allocated in the seventh parliamentary term (2009–2014) (Rules governing the Establishment of Intergroups of 1999 amended 2008: Annex 1).

represent the views of the European Parliament and its political groups (Rules governing the Establishment of Intergroups of 1999, amended 2008: article 2; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003, 155–161).

It is estimated that the total number of (formal and informal) Intergroups since the last election to the European Parliament in 2009 is over 80, but only 27 of them are registered and officially acknowledged as formal Intergroups by the Secretary-General (see Figure 1). The formal Intergroups receive financial support in terms of secretariat, meeting space and translation facilities (MEP 10). A decision on the number of signatures allocated to the political groups is made at the beginning of each parliamentary term in agreement between them (Rules governing the Establishment of Intergroups of 1999, amended 2008).

The restriction in the number of registered Intergroups was designed to prevent them from becoming competitors to the Parliament's political groups (Göhring 2003), which reflects the tradition suspicion of the two political groups as far as the Caucuses in the US Congress are concerned (Victor and Ringe 2009). The regulation of the Intergroups is sometimes justified by actors who are concerned that they take attention away from the parliamentary work. Landorff (2010, 40) quotes a policy adviser in the European Parliament on this:

We are aware that there is a risk that [the Intergroups] might take time away from what the parliament is really about which is the legislative work, and we try to minimise the negative effects, which is also one of the reasons why some of the Intergroups [...] can only get meeting rooms at very specific times, which might not always be very helpful to members.

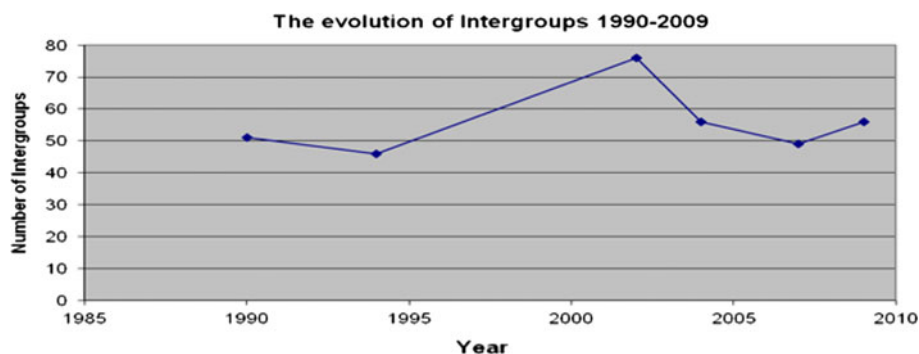


Figure 1. The numeric evolution of Intergroups in the European Parliament.

Source: The data are taken from Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th and 8th editions.



This view is also reflected in article 3 in the Rules governing the Establishment of Intergroups of 1999 (amended 2008) according to which:

Intergroups may not undertake any activities which might result in confusion with the official activities of Parliament or of its bodies or which are likely to have an adverse effect on relations with the other Institutions of the Union or relations with non-member countries.

The practical consequences of the difference between the registered (formal) and unregistered (informal) Intergroups are that the latter are not covered by the European Parliament's regulations and are thus not resourced by the Parliament (Corporate Europe Observatory 2006, 1–12). However, other sources of funding, technical and administrative assistance comprise the Commission, political groups in the Parliament and, not least, organised interests. An Intergroup can, for instance, ask one or more political groups to sponsor its activities by lending it meeting space or translation facilities. Representatives from relevant interest groups are often also a tight part of the network of the Intergroups, even though only parliamentarians can be formal members (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003, 155–161).

The structure of the Intergroups consists of an executive of MEPs, a chairperson and sometimes several vice-chairs who are assisted by a secretariat. The latter is often provided by an entity outside the Parliament with an interest in the work of that particular Intergroup (see funding sources below). The meetings often have different issues for discussion as determined by the executive of MEPs and the secretariat of the Intergroup. Speakers such as academic experts are sometimes invited to give evidence on a specific issue, but interest representatives can also be invited to talk. The MEPs do not usually attend every meeting, but only the ones where an issue of interest to them is on the agenda (Butler 2008, 558–582), and there they might only attend the part of the meeting when their particular hobby horse is being discussed (MEP 1). For example, the number of participants in the meetings for the Intergroup for Welfare and Conservation of Animals ranges from less than 10 right up to 90, with an average attendance of between 25 and 30 (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2007, 184; MEP 7). Some meetings take place on Thursday afternoons during the monthly sessions in Strasbourg, and this can be a hindrance for attracting a big audience due to the fact that many MEPs are already on their way home then. On the other hand, the MEPs tend to have more time at their disposal during the Strasbourg weeks which makes them suitable for Intergroup meetings (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2007, 185).

The president and vice president of the Intergroup normally formulate the agenda. There is a strong division of labour between the committees of the European Parliament and the Intergroups, which is similar to that of the American Caucuses and the political committees of the US Congress. In comparison with the committees, Intergroups have a more contracted focus on particular issues, which often cross the demarcation lines between different committees. Intergroups can have an important role to play by boosting the MEPs' knowledge, and providing them with updated information from the Commission. In that way they ultimately relieve the workload of the committees of the Parliament (MEP 4). Moreover, as discussed below (in the section on new 'wise' policies), Intergroups are important for crafting ideas which might eventually be picked up by other actors and turned into real policies.

To sum up, there are considerable variations in the formalisation and organisational infrastructure of Intergroups in the European Parliament: some have a formal status, while

others are informal, and the former receive direct support from the European Parliament. However, there is (as in the US Congress) a clear division of labour between Intergroups and political committees.

### **Are Intergroups policy networks or policy communities?**

The Intergroups are perceived as having many advantages for the work and purpose of the European Parliament. According to Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton (2003, 156), the Intergroups ‘can help to build that wider consensus which is often essential in the European Parliament’, because of the informal setting and the cross-group coalitions that permit MEPs to make contact with members from other political groups. They make it possible for MEPs of different nationalities and political orientations to come to a common understanding on particular issues and discuss long-term policy developments instead of the usual urgent day-to-day matters. Moreover, the MEPs can stay updated and informed on particular issues which they come across and deal with in their parliamentary work (Butler 2008, 558–582). As with the Caucuses in the US Congress, coordination of information is an important function of the Intergroups.

In this connection, the pivotal question revolves around how close this common understanding will become in the discussions which take place in the Intergroups. Some seem close to being policy communities. One example here is the high-profile Intergroup on ‘Welfare and Conservation of Animals’. Its meetings are organised by the Eurogroup for the protection of animals (MEP 4), and it is normally regarded as the most powerful Intergroup in the European Parliament (MEP 7). It is also an Intergroup with many shared values towards animal welfare, as around 90 percent of those attending are specifically interested in this issue (MEP 7). The MEPs in the group tend to come from member states where animal welfare is high on the political agenda, such as the UK and the Netherlands (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2007, 190). In general, parliamentarians tend to agree with other members of their Intergroup. As one MEP stated:

I attend Intergroups where I tend to agree with the other members. I have been personally invited to the Intergroup on ‘Family and the Right of the Child & Bio Ethics’, but I know that I don’t agree with them on the issue of stem cells, so I don’t attend their meetings. (MEP 8)

Another relatively tight network, though less so than the Animal Welfare Group, is the Intergroup for ‘Small and Medium-sized Enterprises’. This is generally regarded as a network for industrialists (MEP 4). The members of the Trade Union Intergroup also agree that labour market partners are important in the European process:

There are not similar attitudes; however, one joins a group because of strong interest in the subjects. (MEP 3)

On the one hand, Intergroups are characterised by discussions on subjects across the traditional ideological boundaries of the European Parliament (MEP 7). These discussions often take place among deeply interested participants. On the other hand, there are also many Intergroups where members are much more loosely connected like, for example, in ‘Media’ and ‘Media & Free Software and Open Information Society’ (MEP 10). Their function is often to be a strategic network. As another MEP added:

I use the Intergroup in order to find a coalition, find allies in other parties and committees.  
(MEP 7)

The other side of the Intergroups is that the meetings are structurally quite loose. They are open in the sense that if someone is allowed into the European Parliament, meaning that he/she is either a member, staff or invited, he/she will also be allowed to participate in the Intergroup meetings. However, usually only MEPs are allowed to speak during the meetings unless a person is invited to give evidence (MEP 7). This indicates that even the most tightly-knit Intergroups are never actually acting as political communities.

In conclusion, none of the Intergroups are pure policy communities. All of them are more or less strong policy networks. Yet a few of them come close to being a policy community, with the most obvious candidate being the Animal Welfare Intergroup. The rest lie close to the policy network on the continuum.

### **Are Intergroups characterised by ‘negotiation’, ‘communication’ and ‘trust’?**

The official purpose of the Intergroups is to create a forum in which MEPs from different political groups can discuss long-term issues and particular problems that they might want the Commission to tackle and to raise awareness of. Some of the Intergroups are country- or region-specific, such as those focusing on ‘Tibet’ (formal) or the ‘North Sea’ (formal), while some are policy-centred, such as ‘Clothing’ (informal) or the ‘Duty Free’ (informal) group. Others again are more sociably oriented, such as the ‘Golf Team’ (informal) or the ‘Wine’ Intergroup (formal) (Landorff 2010, 43), and a few are occupied with horizontal policies such as ‘Climate Change’ (formal) and ‘Animal Welfare’ (formal) (Göhring 2003, 117–120).

Among the most influential first-generation Intergroups was The Crocodile Group, which no longer exists but later generated several offshoots such as the European Constitution Intergroup formed in 1999 (now closed). The Crocodile Group, headed by Altiero Spinelli, fought for a federal EU and initiated the committee that prepared the Parliament’s proposal for a ‘Treaty on European Union’, which led to the negotiation of the Single European Act (Göhring 2003, 117–120; Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2007, 188). Hence, big ideas which lead to significant results can be fostered through the Intergroups. One reason for this is because of the way in which they function. As with the functions of the Caucuses in the US Congress, easy communication lines and non-hierarchical negotiations are often stressed as some of the advantages of the Intergroups:

Their strength is that we do not have to ask our own group if we want to hold a meeting [...]  
So, in my eyes their informal structure is a clear advantage. (MEP 1)

Another MEP added:

[S]o, I have actually got a network with such people in political groups that I would otherwise not have a relationship to.... (MEP 3)

In other words, it seems as if the Intergroups do promote trust across the political party lines of the European Parliament, if by ‘trust’ we mean that MEPs meet other MEPs across party lines and discuss subjects of common interest more than they would otherwise have done. In fact, ‘interest’ is a word most often used by MEPs to characterise

their participation in the work of the Intergroups (MEP 1, MEP 3, MEP 4, MEP 8, MEP 11). One parliamentarian calls them an ‘oasis for my interests’ (MEP 3). Another MEP said:

‘It is something that interests me and where I do not otherwise have the opportunity of taking care of these interests.’ (MEP 4)

At the same time, ‘interest’ is not the only word used by parliamentarians to characterise their participation in the Intergroups. They are also used for work on a specific good cause where MEPs can signal their preferences (MEP 4). In addition, they are explicitly used as a platform to raise political issues and to put pressure on the Commissioners (MEP 7). Contrary to the situation in the plenary assembly and in the committees of the European Parliament, the debates in the Intergroups can actually have some depth (MEP 10).

In sum, based on the evidence given by the interviewed MEPs, participation in the Intergroups seems to be characterised by interest, non-hierarchical negotiations, easy communication lines and trust between the various political actors.

### **Are Intergroups characterised by the involvement of non-state actors from private and third sector stakeholders and are they affected by lobbyism?**

The possibility of Intergroups becoming arenas for lobbyism has been raised in the scarce public debate about them. Generally, all interviewees confirmed that non-state actors play a role in the activities of the Intergroups, although their roles differ from Intergroup to Intergroup. As one of the respondents said about the involvement of the interest organisations:

It is my impression that they play an indirect role in the sense that they cannot have a formal role to play due to the fact that the Intergroups are networks for parliamentarians. However, typically, they do spar with the leadership of the Intergroups and they do suggest speakers for the meetings; perhaps they fund travel costs to Brussels, and support the Intergroups with material things in other ways. (MEP 4)

In addition, the role of interest organisations can be even stronger than that. Sometimes the Intergroups are nearly completely run by NGOs, and in these cases, MEPs are merely overseeing them in name (MEP 4). In any case, the official rules are somewhat hesitant towards interest organisations having too strong an influence. The regulation of the European Parliament on Intergroups states that:

such groupings may not engage in any activities which might result in confusion with the official activities of Parliament or of its bodies. (European Parliament – Rules of Procedure 2009, Rule 32 (2))

They are thus not allowed to officially express the view of the Parliament or to describe themselves as organs of the Parliament. On top of that, the rules of procedures determine that Intergroups can never meet during a planned voting session and that the MEPs are obliged to follow declaration of financial interest regulations as well as the rules on lobbyists (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003, 157). The question often raised is whether the kind of regulation enforced so far is enough to limit the influence of lobby

groups and the competition the Intergroups represent in relation to the political groups. For instance, one problem is that official parliamentary activity and meeting attendance at committee and plenary is sometimes affected by the participation of MEPs in Intergroups (Corbett, Jacobs, and Shackleton 2003, 156). Many critics also point out that restricting the number of registered Intergroups only means that more than 50 groups are functioning without any kind of public scrutiny or control instead of ensuring transparency obligations for all cross-party groups (Corporate Europe Observatory 2006, 1–12).

In a strong and formal group such as the Intergroup for Animal Welfare, there is almost a kind of fusion of interests between the parliamentarians and the relevant Euro-organisation or Eurogroup (MEP 7). The Eurogroup for Animal Welfare is an umbrella organisation for animal protection organisations from most of the European countries, which has a relatively large secretariat in Brussels. This secretariat also services the Intergroup for Animal Welfare in the European Parliament, and there is at least one person working more or less full-time for the Parliament (MEP 7). The Intergroups are affected by lobbyism in so far as the interest organisations concerned – in this case, the Animal Welfare Intergroup – are responsible for nearly all practical arrangements:

the logistics surrounding the Intergroup meetings ... invitations for speakers, they produce drafts for amendments on various proposals that the MEPs can more or less propose unchanged, and they are the ones who produce headers and write to the Commissioner on behalf of the Intergroup. (MEP 7)

However, there are also limits to the lobbyism of interest organisations vis-à-vis Intergroups. Representatives from interest organisations and industries are placed at the back and sit there listening. Even the Eurogroup representatives do not normally take the floor by themselves unless they act as experts in certain cases (MEP 7). Some informants mention specific examples of the impact of lobbyism. MEP 4 used the Baltic Sea Intergroup to provide access to Aarhus Harbour Authorities in order to allow them a chance to present their project for a vision for the harbour as a gateway to the Baltic Sea. Later on, this project received economic support from EU programmes (MEP 4). The value for the MEP of being a member of this Intergroup consists in the value of signalling his or her political preferences, i.e. the support for Aarhus Harbour as a gateway to the Baltic Sea.

MEP 10 has seen how traditional publicists lobby in order to influence members in his Intergroups on 'Media' and 'New Media'. MEP 8 points to a specific Intergroup that seems to be a well-known organ of a certain kind of lobbyism:

There is certainly active lobbyism in a number of Intergroups, e.g. in Sky and Space, where the European Space Agency in Paris is involved. They constitute a very active lobby organisation. (MEP 8)

On the other hand, MEP 5 argues that lobbyism in the Intergroups he knows of is both modest and reasonable.

In sum, Intergroups are characterised by the involvement of non-state actors. However, this participation varies from strong in some Intergroups to weak in others. Furthermore, many Intergroups are affected by lobbyism, although the degree and impact of this vary considerably. In some Intergroups, there is almost a fusion of interests where the interest groups organise speakers and provide much of the secretariat, etc. Others are

only moderately affected by lobbying on an ad hoc basis. Finally, some Intergroups are probably of very little interest for lobbyists.

### **Are Intergroups producing suggestions for new ‘wise’ policies?**

Certainly, no informants mention explicitly that Intergroups produce suggestions for new ‘wise’ policies. However, many of them stress that the function of Intergroups is to come up with policy solutions to problems, i.e. to be output-oriented. MEP 4 took an initiative to the Baltic Sea Intergroup as a counterweight to the strong focus on Mediterranean issues in the EU. This Intergroup deals with environment, transportation, economic cooperation and ‘Russia, Russia, Russia’ (MEP 4). An example of output from the Baltic Sea Intergroup is that it was instrumental in formulating the first draft of the EU’s Baltic Sea strategy which later turned into a formal report by the European Parliament. This report was taken up by the Commission, and the Council of Ministers later adopted a Baltic Sea Strategy. According to the strategy, all EU programmes and policies across sectors and borders directed towards the Baltic Sea should be viewed within the same framework. An example of this is that one member state should not take initiatives that destroy important fisheries resources in another member state (MEP 4).

Another approach to initiating new policy solutions can be found in the Disability Intergroup, which supervises all other policy areas in order to come up with solutions that are disability-friendly (MEP 1). An MEP also stresses that she wants to gain knowledge about new policies and new political solutions to problems:

And I want to disseminate this knowledge to potentially interested persons in each country. I want to promote a political agenda that is more based on scientific knowledge. (MEP 8)

There are also concrete instances of policy solutions stemming from Intergroups. There are some direct examples of EU legislation that started in the Intergroup on Animal Welfare: one is the ban on the sale of cat and dog skin in Europe, and another the ban of the sale of seal skin. Yet another example is the transportation of animals. Here, an initiative on withdrawing the EU subsidies to long-distance animal transportation was also initiated in the Intergroup (MEP 7). This is an example of (1) that the European Parliament can take initiatives and (2) that Intergroups are actually a forum from where these initiatives can start (MEP 4). At the same time, by being member of this Intergroup the MEP signals from very early on his or her preferences concerning animal welfare, even though this issue has not yet reached the political agenda. In some Intergroups there is a possibility of choosing individual cases that can be elevated to the committees later on and thereby placed on the formal political agenda of the European Parliament (MEP 7). However, other Intergroups have no impact as far as policy solutions are concerned: one example here would be the Tibet Intergroup (MEP 4).

In sum, to a certain degree, the informants consider the Intergroups to be forums for creating what can be interpreted as new ‘wise’ policies. However, they have a number of other functions as well.

### **To what extent are the Intergroups and Caucuses alike?**

According to Victor and Ringe (2009), the Caucuses of the US Congress should be analysed using the following dimensions (cf. above in the beginning of the article):

signalling, exchange of information, coordination of legislative action outside the formal party, and acting as a counterbalance to formal parties. How are these dimensions, when applied as far as the Intergroups are concerned, based upon the analyses above? By answering this question we are at the same time comparing the two institutions which seem to have almost similar functions in the US Congress and in the European Parliament.

### *Signalling*

Although most MEPs do not seem to explicitly mention that they themselves use Intergroups as a way of signalling policy preferences *to* colleagues, they often say that they use them as a way of receiving signals about policy preferences *from* colleagues. The difference is subtle. If the MEPs use Intergroups as ways of receiving signals, it is safe to assume that Intergroups allow legislators to signal their policy preferences, no matter whether intended or not.

Given basic knowledge about EU politics and national media, it might seem implausible that legislators would also use Intergroups as a way of signalling to their constituents (Hix 2005). We know that national media have little interest in trying to convey information about the inner workings of the European Parliament, not to mention such specialised mechanics as the Intergroups, and the public has little interest in hearing about them. Therefore, it would be difficult for a legislator to 'breakthrough' the media with information about the day-to-day work in an Intergroup and use it for preference-signalling to the voters.

Also, it seems simply unlikely that the legislators could signal an interest by participating in an Intergroup that (s)he could not convey in other and easier ways. However, our data suggests that some MEPs actually think of Intergroups as a way of signalling preferences to their constituents and to the NGOs. For instance, MEP 1 reflects the broader view of the informants by stating that participating in Intergroups is 'also a way to send a signal to the citizens and to the NGOs that I do in fact care about this subject'. Hence, a tentative conclusion is that MEPs use the Intergroups to signal preferences to some specialised groups outside the European Parliament.

### *Exchange of information*

In general, the MEPs see Intergroups as a way of exchanging information with other like-minded actors, as well as a way of gaining knowledge about the issues at hand. Often the views on the subject discussed by the members in the Intergroups seem to be similar. However, some MEPs also see this as a way of exchanging information with political opponents. MEP 4 mentions how MEPs of Danish political groups, i.e. the Social Democrats and the Liberals, are often present at the same meetings in the Animal Welfare Groups where they exchange views, even though they often end up voting differently on issues of animal welfare.

There is a consensus that Intergroups comprise an eminent way of expanding knowledge about the issues at hand as well as insight into the views of colleagues and opponents, 'knowledge that can help with orientating oneself in the political landscape of the European Parliament' (MEP 10). The reason why Intergroups help MEPs gain more knowledge about the particular subjects is due to the fact that the discussions are characterised by more depth and less width than that typically found in plenary sessions.



### ***Coordination of legislative action outside the formal party***

Several MEPs see coordination with members of different political parties as an integrated part of the Intergroup work. MEP 1 describes how she gained a network with MEPs outside of her formal party and explicitly describes an incident where a Conservative MEP voted against his party and in alignment with his Intergroup. This is a strong sign of coordination of legislative action outside the formal party. MEP 4 has also experienced how arguments raised in the Intergroups are re-used for debates in the formal parties, especially from the Animal Welfare Group, which seems too often to be a source of arguments for party discussions. MEP 4 also sees Intergroups as a way of finding support from outside the formal party in order for some goals to be achieved. In addition, MEP 9 sees Intergroups as coordinating issues and elevating them to higher levels in the formal parties. She also underlines the fact that Intergroups are the best way of getting to know MEPs from other parties, which in a subtle way can lead to coordination of legislative action.

In general, Intergroups are in fact a way of exploiting ‘soft’ coordinating legislative action outside the formal party group. However, this is much less important than the coordination in the committees. This, again, is in accordance with the evidence from the US Congress.

### ***Counterbalance to formal parties – or reinforcement of positions***

Many of the interviewed MEPs stressed the ability of Intergroups to function as coordination of legislative action, but this does not mean that they change their basic ideological patterns. In fact, it seems that the MEPs use Intergroups as ways of simply reinforcing their already held positions by exchanging views and by receiving signals from colleagues across the political divide. The discussions in the Intergroups are often among the like-minded, so the chances of them counterbalancing the formal parties are slim (MEP 8). This too is in accordance with the situation in the Caucuses in the US Congress (Victor and Ringe 2009).

In sum, Intergroups and Caucuses seem to be characterised by the same features, in that they allow legislators to signal their policy preferences to their colleagues and constituents, serve as venues for exchange of information within the legislature, and allow for coordination of legislative action outside the formal party and committee structure.

### **Conclusion**

This article has taken an explorative approach informed by network theory in mapping the scantily charted academic territory on Intergroups in the European Parliament. The empirical mapping is reiterated in Table 2. The article illustrates that Intergroups differ considerably in structure and resources, as some have a formal status and receive logistical support from the European Parliament, whereas others are more informal and do not obtain any resources. All Intergroups can be classified as relatively strong policy networks as they are characterised by loose interests, are less stable than policy communities and non-exclusive, and have weak access points into the policy-making process (Rhodes 1988). However, a limited number of them come close to being policy communities because of their stable and restricted nature (e.g. the Intergroup for Animal Welfare).



Intergroups facilitate interaction based on easy communication lines, non-hierarchical negotiations, and trust between MEPs of various political groups. The inclusion of non-state actors is a general trait of Intergroups, though there is substantial variation in the degree of involvement between them. Looking at lobbyism in particular, Intergroups are being influenced, but again the degree varies from strong, where there is nearly a fusion of interests, to moderately affected, through to Intergroups which do not draw the attention of lobbyists at all. Finally, Intergroups can serve as incubation forums for new so-called ‘wise’ policies which are being picked up by the Commission or the European Parliament and turned later on into real policies.

Intergroups have most of the same characteristics as the Caucuses of the US Congress (Victor and Ringe 2009). They are used by their members to send signals to some limited potential voter groups outside the European Parliament. In that way, the MEPs circumvent the fact that the media are not in general interested in what is going on in the European Parliament. The MEPs also spend time in the Intergroups in order to gain more knowledge on subjects of interest to them. In addition, they are used for ‘soft’ coordination in the European Parliament, just as the Caucuses in the US Congress are; however, they are – in accordance with their counterparts in the US Congress – by no means counterbalancing the political groups or the political parties.

Table 2. The Anatomy of Intergroups in the European Parliament.

Key question	Answer
How is the work in the Intergroups structured and what resources are available for it, cf. Parsons (1995) and Benson (1982)?	Intergroups comprise MEPs across different political groups which meet to a varying extent to discuss specific issues. Intergroups can either be formal or informal. The formal ones receive support in terms of secretariat, meeting space and translation facilities from the European Parliament.
Are Intergroups policy networks or policy communities, cf. Rhodes (1988) and Parsons (1995)?	All Intergroups are strong policy networks. Yet a few of them come close to being a policy community.
Are Intergroups characterised by “negotiation”, “communication” and “trust”, cf. Bang and Esmark (2009)?	Participation in Intergroups is characterised by interest, non-hierarchical negotiations, easy communication lines, and trust between MEPs from different political groups.
Are Intergroups characterised by the involvement of non-state actors from private and third sector stakeholders cf. Bang and Esmark (2009)?	Intergroups are characterised by the involvement of non-state actors but there is considerable variation among them, from strong in some to weak in others.
Are Intergroups affected by lobbyism, cf. Göhring (2003)?	Intergroups are affected by lobbyism, but the degree of this and the impact of it vary significantly. In some there is almost a fusion of interests, whereas others are only moderately affected by lobbyism. Some Intergroups are of little interest for lobbyists.
Are Intergroups producing suggestions for “wise policies”, cf. Bang and Esmark (2009)?	Whereas Intergroups serve a number of purposes, in some the crafting of new “wise” policies is one of them.
To what extent are the EU Intergroups and the US Caucuses alike?	The two institutions bear all the same features. Intergroups are the Caucuses of the European Parliament.

This theoretically couched analysis of Intergroups opens up a number of avenues for future studies to address. First, systematic quantitative studies are needed to map the structure of interaction in Intergroups in the European Parliament. Such analysis could illuminate the patterns and intensity of interaction between MEPs in Intergroups as well as other actors, including lobbyists. Second, careful process-tracing is needed in order to identify more instructive cases of how Intergroups develop suggestions for ‘wise’ policies and the probably long and winding road for them to become real policies. Third, the study of Intergroups feeds into a broader debate on whether members of a common group socialise because of common identities (Checkel 2003).

More generally, the study of Intergroups has implications for the debate on whether the EU is governed both democratically and effectively (Scharpf 1999). Intergroups can, as discussed, boost the knowledge level of MEPs and ultimately enhance the quality of the policies produced by the EU policy-making system. On the other hand, they can become competitors to the formal activities of the European Parliament, diminish the transparency of the legislative process and be captured by lobbyists, even though this is not the case at present.

This article has pointed to the importance of networks in influencing the political decision-making process directly and – more importantly – indirectly, which is a part of the broader study and practice of governance. Networks and their significance are often difficult to grasp. Network analyses are often highly abstract and not based on systematic scrutiny of specific cases. This article has come some way in ‘cutting up’ a specific group of networks namely the Intergroups of the European Parliament, and this seem to be a fruitful way forward. The empirics of networks should be an area for future studies.

## Note

1. The authors have registered all Intergroups since 1979. This list can be sent on request.

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### **Appendix 1. List of interviewees, their party affiliation and membership of registered (formal) Intergroups**

- MEP 1: Interview: December 15, 2010. Party Group: PSE (Disability).
- MEP 2: Interview: January 21, 2011. Party group: Greens/EFA (Trade Union).
- MEP 3: January 27, 2011. Party group: EPP-ED (Animal Welfare plus Water plus Seas and Coastal Affairs).
- MEP 4: December 6, 2010. Party Group: EFD.
- MEP 5: January 21, 2011: Party Group: EPP-ED (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises plus Sustainable Hunting).
- MEP 6: December 16, 2010. Party Group: ALDE (Baltic Europe).
- MEP 7: December 21, 2010. Party Group: PSE (Animal Welfare).
- MEP 8: December 16, 2010. Party Group: PSE Lesbian, Gay... plus Social Economy).
- MEP 9: December 17, 2010. Party group: Greens/EFA (Family and the Rights ....).
- MEP 10: January 26, 2011. Party Group: ALDE (Media plus New Media).
- MEP 11: Written response to questions from: Received December 8, 2010. Party Group: PSE (Trade Union plus Baltic Area plus Disability).

#### **Abbreviations**

- ALDE: Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe.
- EFD: European Freedom and Democracy.
- EPP-ED: Group of European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats.
- Greens/EFA: Greens and European Free Alliance.
- MEP: Member of European Parliament.
- NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation.
- PSE: Group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.